


EPA delays cleanup for Portland Harbor Superfund site

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Staff cuts, retirements mean final action plan not expected until 2017 or later

Cleanup of the polluted Portland Harbor Superfund site is being delayed again, due in part to budget cuts and staffing changes at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

The EPA regional administrator in Seattle told Portland city officials Tuesday that the final "record of decision" for the cleanup is scheduled for 2017, and that's a "soft target," said City Commissioner Nick Fish. Early this year, the EPA was supposedly on track to complete its record of decision by next year.

The federal sequestration and other budget cuts are shrinking the regional EPA workforce from about 600 employees to about 500, Fish says. One of the people who recently left is Chip Humphrey, the project manager for the Portland Harbor Superfund effort who is retiring. The EPA expects to take at least six months to replace Humphrey, Fish said.

The EPA declared the polluted Portland Harbor a national Superfund site back in 2000, designating a large swath of the Willamette River between the Fremont Bridge and Sauvie Island. Much of the pollution stems from industrial pollutants dumped into the river as much as a century ago.

The city of Portland, Port of Portland, Northwest Natural and scores of other companies and entities are on the hook to pay for cleanup of polluted sediment on the river bottom. The Oregon Congressional delegation has put some heat on EPA to speed up the cleanup, which has dragged on 14 years with little to show for it. EPA officials assured Fish and Mayor Charlie Hales on Tuesday that the Portland Harbor cleanup remains a "national priority for headquarters," Fish said. But that doesn't mean the agency will stick to its timeline.

Cleanup of the river is expected to cost several hundred million dollars, if not more than \$1 billion. A delay in assigning cleanup responsibilities to the scores of potential parties is causing businesses to delay expansion plans and developments on their harbor property.

"There's a cloud over the river that is damaging to our local economy," Fish said. "There are 40,000 river-dependent jobs, mostly blue-collar jobs which we'd like to protect and grow some day."

Delaying the cleanup also prolongs residents' exposure to fish laden with toxins, which can affect the entire food chain.

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